TO SAVE YOUR ONE AND ONLY LIFE
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Psalm 22:1–11, 27–31
Mark 8:34–38

"For those who want to save their life will lose it,
and those who lose their life for my sake,
and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."
Mark 8:35 (NRSV)

A rich self has a distinct attitude toward the past, the present, and the future.
It surveys the past with gratitude for what it has received, not with annoyance
about what it hasn't achieved or about how little it has been given.
A rich self lives in the present with contentment. It still strives,
but it strives out of satisfied fullness, not out of the emptiness of craving.
A rich self looks toward the future with trust. It gives rather than holding back
in fear of coming out too short, because it believes God's promise that
God will take care of it. . . . A rich self gives, because its life is
"hidden with Christ" in the infinite, unassailable, and utterly generous God,
the Lord of the present, the past, and the future.

Miroslav Volf
Free of Charge:
Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace

One of the most traumatic experiences that can happen to any of us is downsizing. It can occur when we move from one place to a smaller place and have to get rid of some things. It occurs frequently when at a "certain age" we decide to sell the place in which we have been living—and accumulating—for decades and move into something more appropriate, smaller, with less storage space, smaller bookshelves. It can be traumatic. At a high school reunion last weekend, it was the subject of much conversation. Some confessed that the prospect of downsizing was so painful they decided they couldn't do it. Others acknowledged a fair amount of good-natured domestic tension generated between a spouse who is a determined, enthusiastic downsizer and one who is an equally determined, enthusiastic saver.

It brought to mind our own move to Chicago twenty-one years ago. A peculiar ritual developed in the weeks before moving day. The children and I, upon arriving home, first visited the alley behind the garage to sort through the materials that had been discarded, dumped by the "resident downsizer" that day, to identify and carry back into the house the treasures without which life was simply not possible. Downsizing is traumatic.

And so I love a story Wendell Berry tells about his friend Lily. Berry is a poet, novelist, essayist who lives and farms on his family farm in Kentucky. He was here two weeks ago to read some new poetry and a short story and to visit. Berry's values are compelling: simplicity, living with limits, friendship, community, good conversation. The story is in an essay, "Quantity vs. Form," which is about one of his favorite topics: the modern American obsession for more—of everything.

> My family and I had a good friend I will call Lily. Lily was industrious and generous, a good neighbor. She was especially well-loved by her neighbors' children and grandchildren, though she had no children of her own. She lived a long time, surviving her husband by many years. At last, permanently ill and debilitated, she had to leave the small house that she and her husband had bought in their latter years and go to the nursing home. My brother, who was her lawyer, never until then much needed, arranged for the sale of her house and all her worldly goods.
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> I went to visit her a day or two after the sale. She was bedfast, sick and in some pain, but perfectly clear in her mind. We talked of the past and of several of our old neighbors, long gone. And then, speaking of the sale of her possessions, she said, "I'm all finished now. Everything is done."
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> She said this so cheerfully that I asked her, "Lily, is it a load off your mind?"
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> She said, "Well, Wendell, it hurt me. I laid here the night when I knew it was all gone, and I could *see* it all, all the things I'd cared for so long. But, yes, it is a load off my mind." (*The Way of Ignorance and Other Essays* p. 81)

Berry concludes, "I was so moved and impressed by what she said that I wrote it down. She had lived her life and met her hardships bravely and cheerfully, and now she faced her death fully aware and responsible and with what seemed to me a completed grace. I didn't then and I don't now see how she could have been more admirable."

One of the interesting new developments in the American culture is the appearance everywhere of self-storage facilities: everywhere you go, long

rows of locked compartments to store what people have accumulated. A *Chicago Tribune* feature article last month, “Too Much Stuff,” described “the booming self-storage industry that taps into Americans’ boundless ability to accumulate.” There are maybe 100,000 self-storage facilities in the country, 6.9 square feet of storage space for every American. The article told about Jim Johnson, seventy-five, who visits his 12- x 48-foot storage facility every morning: says a little prayer, sits back in a recliner and takes comfort in his stuff—four desks, tools, fishing gear, pails of roofing rails, broken radios, a rusty radiator, and a Heineken beer sign. The *Tribune* couldn’t resist editorializing: “We may no longer be the top dogs in the production of steel, cars, televisions, and other manufactured goods, and we may be losing our edge in science and technology. But the explosion in the number of self-storage facilities clearly suggests a resurgent America, indeed a nation of stuff.”

What’s that about; our obsessive accumulating, our unwillingness to let go, the trauma we experience at the prospect of downsizing? Is it because for years we have been bombarded with the message that our happiness, our fulfillment as persons, our salvation if you will, depends on our ability to purchase, own, and enjoy the right automobile, jewelry, clothing, to travel to the right places, to live at the right address? Is it because for most of our lives we have been bombarded with the message that there will always be more of everything, that it is our God-given right to expect and enjoy more, no limitations on anything?

Wendell Berry thinks so, thinks that we indulge a limitless desire for a supposedly limitless quantity of everything, including life expectancy. And then he digs deeper: “This insatiable desire for more is the result of an overwhelming sense of incompleteness—which, itself, is the result of the insatiable desire for more.” Berry calls it the “wheel of death.” We desire more which makes us feel incomplete, unsatisfied, which makes us want more.

Yale theologian Miroslav Volf, a Croatian scholar who immigrated to the United States after the war that decimated his nation, looks at American culture from that unique perspective. He has written a new book, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*. Volf thinks our insatiable desire for more has to do with our sense of our own fragility, our mortality. “No matter how much we have, our resources are finite, and we ourselves are fragile. Take our amenities away and we feel diminished” (p. 106).

And so it is misplaced faith, a form of idolatry, an investment of trust and resources and energy and imagination and love in the wrong place.

The dynamic remains deeply within us and sometimes even plays itself out religiously: “Does God Want You to be Rich?” the cover of *Time* magazine asked last month. The article was about the emergence within American Protestantism, particularly the televangelists, of “Prosperity Theology”—“Name It and Claim It”—which declares that a God who loves you wants you to be wealthy and comes close to promising that if you believe you will be rewarded. “Why would an awesome and mighty God want anything less for his children?” one recently successful convert asked.

The theological and moral bankruptcy of that, of the whole misguided, sleazy attempt to convince people that God blesses faithful people with wealth and success and health, got to me, I confess, as I pondered the deaths of those dear Amish children whose parents could not have been more faithful, got to me deeply as I visited last week a good and faithful man facing radical surgery.

It gets to me, I confess, the way Christian faith, Jesus himself, is literally hijacked and transformed into an unrecognizable, self-important, weekend-management-seminar guru, whom to follow is to be successful in your career, marriage, relationships, to be healthy and wealthy.

What he said was this: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” What he said on this topic surely ranks among the most important things he—or anyone else—ever said: “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

He came to show us that we are beloved children of God. He came to show us that there is a God who loves us. He died for that love. And he came to show us what human life—authentic, genuine human life—looks like. He came to expose all the idolatries, all the misguided, misdirected schemes to produce the wholeness and freedom and happiness and salvation for which we, all of us, desperately long. He said, “Follow me.” He said give your life away in love and you will save it. He said give your life to those you love: your children, your beloveds whoever they are; give your life and love and your resources to the causes and institutions that make the world a more Godly and therefore more human place. Give your life away and you will be utterly alive, he said.

And, he warned, you hold tightly to what you have—don’t give your love and passion and energy and money, but save it, hoard it, store it—and you will lose the life you are so desperately trying to save.

The promise is not that if you give you will become successful and wealthy. It’s more important than that. The promise is that if you give you will be alive.

It is about you, me, and our possessions, our resources, our money. Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow says that in contrast to the Prosperity Theology of the televangelists, mainline churches and preachers rarely talk plainly about money, and when they do, it is almost always in general, vague euphemisms. Even though there are literally thousands of references to money in the Bible, Wuthnow says that "there has been a long taboo on talking candidly about it" in the church.

Dana Ferguson broke that taboo last Sunday and called me to report that the roof hadn't fallen in.

So in the interests of candor and the straight talk Christians need in order to make faithful decisions, according to Wuthnow, here are some things to ponder.

Fourth Presbyterian Church is a large and growing congregation of 5,600 members. Its annual budget, along with its affiliate mission entities, is $9.4 million, of which 40 percent is used for mission, in the city and throughout the world. Thirty per cent of the annual income of the church comes from invested funds, 15 percent from fees, and 55 percent from individual giving.

Of our 5,600 members, 26 percent pledge and another 11 percent contribute. In other words, thirty-seven percent are supporting the enterprise financially. One of the things this means is that Fourth Presbyterian Church, the largest congregation by far in the Presbytery of Chicago, ranks 52nd of the 107 congregations in the Presbytery in terms of per capita giving.

We continue to grow in every area of church life except this one: new members, infants baptized, children educated, the sick cared for, the hungry fed, the naked clothed, the discouraged encouraged—the costs of maintaining it. Growth everywhere except here, so that we face a gap between what we are called to do and be in the name of Jesus Christ and the resources with which to pay for it.

And I'm betting that Robert Wuthnow is right. It's because we haven't been honest—about the facts and the financial realities. The people who don't give think that we don't need them. Nor have we been honest about the theology, the clear call of Jesus Christ to follow him and to save your one and only life by giving it away.

I've always been slightly amused and slightly irritated that in the arcane vocabulary of stewardship and church finances, the actual membership of a congregation is not as important as what are called "Giving Units." I always

thought it was bureaucratic, impersonal, and downright rude to refer to church members as Giving Units.

I've changed my mind. I think that is exactly what this whole matter is about: transforming you and me into what God wants us to be—people who know how to give and therefore how to live, Giving Units. That's what Jesus Christ came for: to teach us how to live our one and only life, to teach us how to love and give our lives away, to teach us how to be alive.

When Wendell Berry was here last week, I had the opportunity to be with him in a conversation with editors of the *Christian Century* magazine. The conversation ranged widely and easily. He talked about life in the city and life on the farm. He talked about the church and how farmers become uncomfortable when the church starts to talk about how sinful and awful the world is because the farmer has just milked the cows and has loved it and knows that the world is an amazing and holy place and so is every human life, so is your life and mine. And he talked about aging. He said, "To me, at my age, the main question is, 'Can I be a grateful man when I die?' Can I remember up to and on the last day that I had a very good life?"

To save your one and only life . . .

"Those who want to save their life will lose it," Jesus said. "And those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

"God, whose giving knows no ending . . .
Gifted by you, we turn to you,
Offering up ourselves in praise."

O God, teach us to give. Help us to loosen our grasp and open our hands. Warm our hearts with your love in Jesus Christ and give us the faith and courage
to live our lives fully by giving them away.

"Thankful song shall rise forever,
Gracious donor of our days." Amen

("God, Whose Giving Knows No Ending" hymn text by Robert L. Edwards)